

American Museums Offer Online Educational Resources

By JEFFREY THOMAS

Finding the best and most innovative
educational offerings on the Web.

American museums offer a wealth of online exhibitions, podcasts and other educational material that represent learning opportunities for teachers and students around the world.

There are approximately 17,000 museums in the United States, and “most museums of any size now have a Web presence,” according to Jason Hall, the director of government and media relations at the American Association of Museums in Washington. In addition, many libraries and other institutions have made some of the collections they hold partially or entirely available online. The Internet has become the “principal way of reaching those who can’t physically come,” says Hall.

The result is a bonanza for teachers looking for interesting new lesson plans or for students searching for material on a specific topic. Search pages specifically designed for teachers improve access to the materials, as do thematically arranged teaching resources from the Smithsonian Institution, the world’s largest museum complex (www.si.edu).

The Smithsonian Global Sound (www.smithsonianglobalsound.org) provides Internet access to more than 40,000 recordings available for downloading, most for 99 cents. Selections include blues, bluegrass, cowboy songs, the Afghan Rubab, French chansons, Jamaican calypsos, Sicilian tarantellas, Chinese opera and Tajik and Uzbek music.

The catalogue of selections can be searched by genre, instrument, artist name or song title, as well as by continent, coun-

The entry hall of the National Museum of Natural History, one of the most popular Smithsonian museums in Washington, D.C.



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try or region of origin.

Although there is no simple way to look comprehensively at available educational resources, there are some easy ways to find the best.

Fifty U.S. organizations and agencies ranging from the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to the White House have tried to make educational materials easier to find by participating in the Federal Resources for Educational Excellence Web site (www.free.ed.gov). It includes teaching ideas, learning activities, photographs, maps, primary documents, statistics, paintings, sound recordings and podcasts on thousands of topics. It is particularly useful because it includes a great deal of educational material from agencies of the federal government and museums and has an archive dating back to 1998.

[Science.gov](http://www.science.gov) is a gateway to reliable information about science from across the federal government, including museums. Created by a partnership of 10 major U.S. government science agencies, it offers resources for teachers and students in scientific or technical fields.

Finding the most useful online educational materials offered by the thousands of private museums and libraries is more difficult, but special subject pages can streamline the process. The U.S. Embassy in Berlin (<http://germany.usembassy.gov>), for example, has a comprehensive page of resources on the American Indian.

American museums are trying to help teachers and students by providing special pages that organize online exhibitions or make their collections more accessible to educators. Many also are providing free lesson plans or teaching modules that use materials in their collections.

New York's Guggenheim Museum (www.guggenheim.org), for example, provides a variety of curriculum materials for teachers based on such recent exhibitions as Russia and The Aztec Empire. It aims to develop a comprehensive range of lessons for educators on art and artists in the museum's collection.

The U.S. Library of Congress has a special page offering a "teacher's eye view" to more than seven million historical documents, photographs, maps, films and audio recordings, with lesson plans and activities designed for use with



the collections for various grade levels (<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/>). For example, "Interviews with Today's Immigrants" offers immigration stories illustrating the American immigration experience during the second half of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century.

The Smithsonian Institution's "In Your Classroom" program recently released a three-lesson teaching module, The Music in Poetry, the latest in a series.

The module introduces students to the rhythms of poetry by focusing on the ballad stanza and the blues stanzas of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. A sound track for the module available on the Smithsonian Web site includes early recordings by singers Bob Dylan and Suzanne Vega.

Hall says that the most rapid growth in the museum field is in children's museums and science and technology museums. "These museums typically do not collect unique objects but instead focus on

education," he said, and they try to educate by presenting processes.

An excellent example is the Brooklyn Children's Museum (www.brooklynkids.org). It won a silver medal in the American Association of Museums' 2005 MUSE Awards for its Collection Central Online, which eventually will include access to virtually all of the museum's 30,000 cultural artifacts and science specimens.

"What fun it is, and how easy it is, to find an object, maybe even hear the sound it makes, zoom in and around it, and even make your own inspired drawing for submission to a public online collection," the MUSE judges said. "The ease with which relationships among objects can be explored will really get kids discovering, thinking and learning."

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